

Diane BLAKEMORE. *Understanding Utterances*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992. p. xi+191.

Understanding Utterances constitutes a welcome textbook on pragmatics which focuses on one particular approach: Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson's (1986, 1990) relevance theoretic approach to communication and cognition. Under this approach, pragmatic interpretation is considered a psychological process, governed by a single cognitive principle – the principle of relevance. Understanding utterances is not simply a matter of knowing the meanings of the words uttered and the way in which they are combined, it also involves drawing inferences¹ on the basis of non-linguistic information. Under the relevance approach, the basic claim is that every act of inferential communication creates a presumption of optimal relevance, in the light of which hypotheses about the communicator's intention can be evaluated.

The book is divided into three parts and each part is subdivided into three chapters. Some exercises and discussion topics are provided in the text and at the end of sections, so that the reader feels encouraged to participate in the development and application of the framework. Apart from the general references, recommended reading lists covering the main topics are also supplied at the end of each chapter.

Part I *Fundamentals* offers the reader an introduction to the theoretical framework, which is further developed and exemplified in the following two parts. In chapter 1, *Communication and the context*, the author addresses important notions such as the nature of communi-

cation and the role of inference in the recovery of what is being communicated. The author finally takes up the question of the context, which she defines in psychological terms: a subset of the hearer's beliefs and assumptions about the world.

Chapter 2, *Relevance*, provides a clear and illustrated explanation of Sperber and Wilson's theory of utterance interpretation built around the notion of relevance. Relevance theory has its origins in Grice's (1975) co-operative principle and maxims and is grounded in a general view of human cognition. The theory is based on a few very simple assumptions: (i) that every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded; (ii) that not all these interpretations are equally accessible on any given occasion; (iii) that hearers are equipped with a single, very general criterion for evaluating interpretations as they occur to them; and (iv) that this criterion is strong enough to exclude all but at most a single possible interpretation, so that the hearer is entitled to assume that the first interpretation that satisfies the criterion is the only one. All this is spelt out in the principle of relevance, which claims that every act of communication creates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. An utterance, then, on a given interpretation, is optimally relevant if it has enough contextual effects and if it puts the hearer to no unjustifiable processing effort. For example, suppose that someone walks into the room you are in now and says:

1. Inferential communication involves the formation and evaluation of hypotheses about the communicator's intentions.

- (1) I have to tell you that the building's on fire.

«The building» is a referential expression, and different assignments of reference will lead to different levels of contextual effect. In the circumstances, the first hypothesis to come to all our minds will be that «the building» means the building we are in. Clearly, the utterance, on this interpretation, would have enough effects to be worth our attention. The three ways in which information can have contextual effects are clearly exemplified in the book: by combining with the context to yield contextual implications, by strengthening existing assumptions, and by contradicting and eliminating existing assumptions. Secondly, the notion of processing effort is a psychological one: a speaker who wants to avoid any risk of misunderstanding should make the intended representation as easy as possible for the hearer to recover.

Chapter 3, *Pragmatics, linguistics and literature*, addresses the dichotomy between semantics and pragmatics and shows how the principle of relevance explains the interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge in the interpretation of utterances. The author takes a generative, and hence modular view of language. In this respect, the interpretation of utterances involves the linguistic form of the utterance, contextual assumptions and the assumption that the speaker is being relevant. The important question raised in this chapter is which aspects of the interpretation of an utterance are determined by semantic factors and which are determined by pragmatic factors.

Part II, *Explicature*, deals with the recovery of the explicit content of utterances. In chapter 4, *Explicating and implicating*, the author distinguishes between those assumptions that are explic-

cated (explicitly communicated) by an utterance and those that are implicated (implicitly communicated). Sperber and Wilson call the result of fleshing out the semantic representation of an utterance an explicature. Under this approach, and as shown in chapter 5, *The proposition expressed*, pragmatics plays an important role in determining what is explicitly said. Semantics proper gives the linguistic meaning of the words; if referents must be assigned, if words must be disambiguated or vague terms enriched, the principle of relevance allows the hearer to determine the explicit content of the utterance (i.e., the proposition expressed). In other words, under Relevance Theory, pragmatics plays an important role in the process of reference assignment, disambiguation and enrichment.

Chapter 6, *Higher-level explicatures: Attitudes and speech acts*, focuses on the role of utterances in relation to the behavior of speakers and hearers in interpersonal communication. Following Sperber and Wilson, the author suggests that understanding utterances does not necessarily involve the recovery of a speech-act description as it defined in the traditional speech-act framework (Austin (1962); Searle (1969)). Utterances are relevant in virtue of what they represent. In this sense, there are various ways in which an utterance may represent, and, correspondingly, be relevant. An ordinary assertion is relevant as a (descriptive) representation of a state of affairs. An order is relevant as a representation of a desirable state of affairs. The relevance of a question derives from its indication that its answer would be relevant. In other words, linguistic indicators like declarative, imperative and interrogative mood serve only to «indicate the direction in which the relevance of the utterance lies».

Since utterance interpretation is not simply a matter of identifying the pro-

position expressed, the final part, *Implicature*, is concerned with the recovery of implicit meaning, that is, everything that an utterance communicates in context and which is not part of the explicit content. Chapter 7, *Types of implicature*, suggests that implicatures may be more or less determinate, or as Sperber and Wilson put it, more or less strong. The strongest implicatures are those fully determinate implicated conclusions and premises that the hearer is forced to derive in order to obtain an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. The main goal of chapter 8, *Constraints on implicatures*, is to show how speakers may use linguistic expressions to indicate the way an utterance is to be interpreted as relevant. The chapter presents some of the discourse connectives which indicate and constrain the kind of contextual implications the hearer is expected to derive.

Chapter 9, *Implicatures and style*, is concerned with the interpretation of stylistic effects and figurative utterances, with special reference to metaphor and irony. Under Relevance Theory the recovery of metaphoric and ironic utterances demands extra processing effort, which encourages the hearer to look for additional weak or strong implicatures. Metaphors are considered less-than-literal representations of a speaker's thought, whereas irony is a variety of echoic² interpretive use in which the proposition expressed represents a belief attributed by the speaker to someone else.

Understanding Utterances offers the reader a useful introductory coverage of Sperber and Wilson's relevance-theoretic approach to communication and cognition. As the author states in the preface, the aim of the book is not to present an

overview of current pragmatic theories, but rather to focus on this particular approach to pragmatics. As a consequence, the book contains both a general introduction to the framework and detailed discussions of specific pragmatic phenomena. In this respect, and given the introductory nature of the textbook, some readers might find a glossary, or more clarifying notes on terminology to be missing. On the whole, Blakemore's work is a most welcome addition to the literature and can be recommended to specialist and student alike.

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2. It implicitly expresses the speaker's attitude -one of disapproval in ironic utterances - to the beliefs being expressed.